

INTRODUCTION

You would expect the President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to win a Nobel Peace Prize, especially when he's the same man who organized the United Nations, served as its Secretary General while he did so and then carried the UN charter home to the White House on a special army plane. Instead, this very man was tried in a criminal court, found guilty and sent to prison. It was called the Trial of the Century, and it was a media circus second to none. The year was 1951. The convicted felon's name was Alger Hiss.

I knew Alger for more than thirty years, and I never liked him much. I can't for the life of me figure out why – not even now – but because of that, I didn't bother to learn about his case until I faced prosecution myself, though on hardly a scale approaching his. Still, court cases – the threat of a stretch in Holloway – do something to a person. Nobody I knew had ever stood in the dock. Except Alger. He was long dead by then, and I started reading about him out of morbid interest in the ordeal of a fellow sufferer. But the more I read, the more outraged I became. Facts had been twisted and distorted to link together chains of events conjured out of nowhere. Witnesses had been intimidated and suborned. Evidence had been created. Evidence had been suppressed. Evidence had been destroyed. William O. Douglas, longest-serving justice of the Supreme Court, wrote that “in my view no court at any time could possibly have sustained the conviction. ”

And yet that's exactly what the courts did.

The Hiss case put Richard Nixon on the road to the White House; he sailed into the Senate while he was still prosecuting Alger, and he went straight from the Senate to the job of Vice President under General Eisenhower. A decade later he had the Oval Office to himself. He'd worked hard for his prize. He says in his White House tapes that he had Alger convicted long before the Trial of the Century began. How? “We won the Hiss case in the papers.” And so he had. Never before had there been a press campaign like it. Nixon turned the hero of the

United Nations into the villain of the Cold War against Communist Russia with headline screamers and an incredible jumble of old-fashioned lies. The most jaw-dropping of them involved his proof of the “greatest treason conspiracy” in American history. This was, he said, “microfilm” of “top secret” army documents to be passed to the Soviets. One of his sidekicks plucked it out of a pumpkin, a midnight raid on a vegetable patch that made headlines all across the country. He said the developed film would make a pile three feet high. Three feet high! Thousands upon thousands of pages. Photographs of him examining this very microfilm with a magnifying glass – just like Sherlock Holmes – were plastered across front pages everywhere.

What was in this huge, incredible cache? Nobody knew. Nixon wouldn't tell. It was *too* secret. The Justice Department subpoenaed it. Nixon refused to turn it over; he said the Justice Department was riddled with Communists, that they'd cover up this terrible act for no better reason than to win the next election. He kept the film top secret for a quarter of a century. An incredible feat! For all those years, he manipulated everybody into believing it was too sensitive to be revealed to anybody.

And what did it turn out to be?

Home camera snapshots of maintenance manuals from a public library.

Literally.

People sometimes call Alger Hiss ‘America's Dreyfus’, and it's pretty clear why. The French military command charged Army Captain Alfred Dreyfus with passing military secrets to Imperial Germany. Evidence was forged, tainted, planted, suppressed to make a case, and in 1894 they sent him for life to the Devil's Island penal colony. A massive cover-up followed; the press and public opinion swallowed it whole. Dreyfus was a Jew, and anti-Semitic riots burst out all over France. World opinion was horrified. As Piers Paul Read put

it: “How could France, the most civilised country in Europe, experience this eruption of medieval barbarism?”

In Alger’s case, anti-communism played the role of that medieval barbarism. Communism was *the* major issue in America back in the middle of the last century; it all stemmed from fears of the Soviet experiment in Utopia that began in 1917: no social classes, no rich people, no poor ones, equal rights for everybody. “I have seen the future and it works,” wrote journalist Lincoln Steffens. The trouble was, it was working only if you averted your eyes from bloodbath and famine. By the time Alger was on trial, the dream was long gone; the terrifying Joseph Stalin had been in power for a couple of decades, and he’d turned a vast land mass into the biggest concentration camp in history. Nobody was allowed out. Nobody was allowed in. Soviet armies gobbled up East European countries one after another and patrolled barbed-wire prison fences that ran for hundreds of miles. Millions of people died trying to escape, and the rest of the world was on high alert.

As always, politicians exploited the vote-getting potential of the threat. Nothing new there. But in America thought itself became the target. Who might be thinking like a Communist? Who wasn’t thinking the American way? How could you tell? How could anybody tell? It wasn’t easy. The US Armed Forces Information Services put out newsreels and manuals to help. Watch what people read, what organizations they support. Listen to them. These “secret Communists” use big words and long sentences. They play on your altruism with talk about civil rights, peace, racial discrimination.

Report *any* suspicions to the police. Call up the FBI.

A single anonymous accusation was enough to put somebody on a list of suspected Communists, and there were hundreds of lists. Appearing on one was enough to destroy a reputation, lose a job and any hope of getting another. Friends and colleagues ran for fear of contamination. Here’s one ordinary guy who just happened to share a name with another

ordinary guy on the suspect list: “This thing...has ruined my life, has ruined my livelihood, has ruined me.” He’d been told “that I had better get out of the neighbourhood. They smeared my windows. Boys threw stones at my apartment. I have lost all my friends...I am through as far as my life is concerned, and everything is through with me.”

It wasn’t just ordinary people either. Nobody was exempt. Victims included way too many of America’s gifted, people like Charlie Chaplin, Bertolt Brecht, Sam Wanamaker, Aaron Copeland, Arthur Miller, Robert Oppenheimer, Linus Pauling, Orson Welles.

Adlai Stevenson, running for president, told New Yorkers, “The tragedy of our day is the climate of fear in which we live... Too often sinister threats to the Bill of Rights, to freedom of the mind, are concealed under the patriotic cloak of anti-communism.” After a few years of this, Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of President Franklin D Roosevelt – famous for the ringing declaration, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” – spoke for many Americans when she said, “I am tired of being afraid.”

Parallels with terrorism are hard to escape. Bin Laden and ISIS are as real as Stalin and the purges. The accompanying political exploitation – its focus firmly on home-grown converts – is all too real too. We’ve reached the point where the immediate reaction to anybody with a vaguely Middle Eastern name is fear. The UK.gov and London Metropolitan Police sites give advice just as the US Army did. You’re to listen, watch, “trust your instincts” and report to the police. Ring up MI5. Has your neighbour started attending a mosque? Does he invite Muslims to his house? Maybe he just acts funny. Doesn’t matter. Report him. You’ll remain anonymous, and your telephone call will put him on a “No Fly List”.

It’s the old familiar pattern. An enemy appears on the horizon. The politicians, the military, the media whip an amorphous force into an all-powerful evil that becomes the focus for people’s hatreds and the excuse for their failures. There’s solidarity in terror. We’re the multitude. If we’re to win, we have to think as one. You’re either for us or against us.

Opportunists like Nixon move in to exploit the situation. That's when casualties like Alger and Dreyfus happen.

Both were injustices on a monumental scale. Dreyfus's has been corrected; he was completely exonerated. Now it's Alger's turn.

PART ONE

1

1960

One Friday afternoon Dexter asked me if I'd like to go out to dinner tomorrow with the greatest spy in American history: Alger Hiss. Public Enemy Number One.

"Alger Hiss!" I cried. "*The Alger Hiss?*"

"The very one. How about the des Artistes?"

Our apartment was on Manhattan's Upper West Side, just off the Hudson River. Early summer and already very hot. Manhattan was boiling. A sweaty taxi drive to a restaurant off Central Park. A sweaty ride back. The staff at the Café des Artistes were friendly, helpful, welcoming. At least they were with their ordinary customers like Dexter and me. But how would they react to Alger Hiss of all people? I'm scared of confrontations. I'd remembered the name because my civics book in the ninth grade had said that he was the most dangerous traitor in the history of the United States. He was America's Judas Iscariot, and the glee in Dexter's voice told me that his reputation hadn't changed all that much.

"Why don't I make us something here?" I said.

But then I'm scared of people as well as confrontations. And Alger Hiss just had to be one of the scariest people around.

When the doorbell rang on Saturday evening, Dexter said, "You answer it."

"No."

"Come on."

"No!"

"He's not going to bite you."

I still remember unlocking the door. I still remember opening it. Usually I'm bad at faces. I didn't even recognize my own sister when I hadn't seen her for a few years. But I recognised this criminal at once from my schoolbook. He'd been decidedly handsome in that picture – boyish, clean-featured, wide-spread eyes, high cheek-bones – even though the photographer had caught him in a police van being carted off to jail. He was handcuffed. He wore a dangerous-looking 1940s hat that shaded one eye. The youthful good looks somehow made him more sinister than ever, and the name! Alger *Hiss*! How could anybody with a name like that be other than a villain?

There'd been a mere ten years between the photo in my schoolbook and this hot Manhattan evening; the once-boyish Alger Hiss who stood in the hallway had been recast as a mediaeval flagellant, tall and gaunt, all bone and shadows.

He wore a dark suit, tie, white shirt that was a little loose around his neck.

I couldn't think of a single word to say.

"You must be Joanie," he said.

I nodded.

"I'm Alger. This is Isabel."

I nodded.

"Do you think perhaps we might come in?"